

## Grosse Ile: Canada's Irish Famine Memorial

Michael Quigley

Volume 39, 1997

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/lt39cri01>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Quigley, M. (1997). Grosse Ile: Canada's Irish Famine Memorial. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 39, 195–214.

# CRITIQUE

## Grosse Ile: Canada's Irish Famine Memorial

Michael Quigley

Children of the Gael  
died in their thousands on this island  
having fled from the laws of foreign tyrants  
and an artificial famine in the years 1847-48.  
God's blessing on them.  
Let this monument be a token to their name and honour  
from the Gaels of America.  
God Save Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

ON ST. PATRICK'S DAY, 17 March 1996, Sheila Copps, Minister of Canadian Heritage, announced Canada's recognition of Grosse Ile as "the Irish Memorial." The National Historic Site will tell the story of the Irish tragedy in the quarantine station in 1847, focusing on the mass graves of the Irish famine victims, the tall Celtic Cross (which bears this inscription), and the only remaining hospital building from 1847, a long wooden shed called the Lazaretto. Equally important, it will "pay

<sup>1</sup>This is the English translation of the Irish text on the main panel at the base of the Celtic Cross. The Irish reads: *Cailleadh Clann na nGaedheal ina míltibh ar an Oileán so ar dteicheadh dhóibh ó dlíghthibh na dtíoránach ngailda agus ó ghorta tréarach isna bliadhantaibh 1847-48. Beannacht dílis Dé orra. Bíodh an leacht so i gcomhartha garma agus onóra dhóibh ó Ghaedhealaibh Ameriocá. Go saoraigh Dia Éire.*

Michael Quigley, "Grosse Ile: Canada's Irish Famine Memorial," *Labour/Le Travail*, 39 (Spring 1997), 195-214.

homage to the welcome, generosity and devotion of the local population" who comforted the afflicted.<sup>2</sup>

The minister's announcement was the culmination and vindication of a four-year-long campaign to prevent the Parks Service from turning it into a Canadian Ellis Island. In the longer view, it marks a full century of activity by Irish Canadians to assert the importance of Grosse Ile as the most important Great Famine mass grave site in North America.

Grosse Ile is a small island, less than 2 kilometres long by half a kilometre across, in the middle of the St. Lawrence 48 kilometres downstream from Québec City. In the early 19th century, it was a favourite picnic spot for officers in the Québec garrison. Robert Whyte, who arrived at Grosse Ile in July 1847, called it "a fairy scene," "the distant view of which was exceedingly beautiful," but "this scene of natural beauty was sadly deformed by the dismal display of human suffering that it presented."<sup>3</sup>

The landscape of Grosse Ile is scarred by the suffering of those for whom the island was not only their first footfall in the New World but also, for all too many, their last. At the western end of the island, between Cholera Bay and the Celtic Cross on Telegraph Hill, is a long meadow, corrugated by a regular series of ridges, which inevitably remind the visitor of lazy beds, the old Irish ridge-and-trench potato fields, labour-intensive but enormously productive. On Grosse Ile, too, the ridges are man-made, for they mark the mass graves where the Irish Famine victims of 1847 were buried, "stacked like cordwood."<sup>4</sup>

### *The Grosse Ile Quarantine Station*

The Grosse Ile quarantine station opened in 1832, in response to well-founded Canadian fears of the cholera epidemic which swept westwards across Europe from 1826. It was intended to be "the centre of an outer defence to prevent the disease reaching Quebec City."<sup>5</sup> The island was chosen because it is isolated in mid-river but still close to Québec City, which was then the second busiest port, after New York, in North America. In its first year of operation, and again in 1847, however, it failed to meet the challenge.

The rudimentary nature of the quarantine station in 1832 is best seen in the fact that when cholera reached Québec City, on 8 June aboard the brig *Carricks* from Dublin, the *Quebec Mercury* ascribed the cause to "some unknown disease."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Sheila Copps, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Canadian Heritage, "Speaking Notes: Declaration of Grosse Ile and the Irish Memorial," Québec, 17 March 1996, 3.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Whyte, *The Ocean Plague* (Boston 1848), reissued as *Robert Whyte's 1847 Famine Ship Diary* (Cork 1994), 62, 67.

<sup>4</sup>J.A. Jordan, *The Grosse Ile Tragedy* (Québec 1909), 41-2.

<sup>5</sup>Chas A. Mitchell, "Events leading up to and the Establishment of the Grosse Ile Quarantine Station," *Medical Services Journal*, (1967), 1436.

<sup>6</sup>Marianna O'Gallagher, *Grosse Ile: Gateway to Canada, 1832-1937* (Québec 1984), 24.

In 1832, the number of immigrants (51,000) was 50 per cent higher than usual, in large part because the previous year had seen a partial failure of the potato harvest in Ireland. Hunger and physical debilitation proved a fertile breeding ground for cholera, and most of the victims of the Canadian cholera epidemic of 1832 were Irish.

The doctors and attendants on Grosse Ile were over-worked and under-qualified to treat a disease many of them had never seen. The diagnosis, treatment, and epidemiology of cholera were all a mystery to them. The hospital facilities on the island, still incomplete, were overwhelmed as the number of sick immigrants exceeded all expectations. "At times," says Mitchell, "over thirty vessels were present in the anchorage. In a word, the capacity of the station was insufficient to deal with the vessels bearing infected immigrants."<sup>7</sup>

The cholera epidemic of 1832 was the result of the unavoidable failure of the quarantine station. By September 30, the newspapers reported the "official burials" at Québec City at 3,292. More than that had died at Grosse Ile.<sup>8</sup> The Irish dead of 1832 were buried in mass graves at low tide in Back Bay, whence it became known as Cholera Bay.<sup>9</sup> The summer of 1832 was a foretaste of the disaster which overwhelmed Grosse Ile in 1847. The island's story is irrevocably Irish because Ireland was the wellspring of the catastrophes of 1832 and 1847.

### *An Gorta Mór — The Great Starvation*

The potato crop failed across all of Europe in 1846-48, but only Ireland witnessed starvation, disease, and death on a vast scale. The population was reduced by one-third in less than five years: at least one million Irish people died of starvation and disease, while 1.5 million fled the country. In August 1989, at a ceremony marking the 80th anniversary of the unveiling of the Celtic Cross, Dr. Edward J. Brennan, Ireland's Ambassador to Canada, recalled the Famine in words which encapsulate both contemporary and modern Irish understanding of the Great Hunger:

During the years 1845-47, with the failure of the potato crop, which was their principal means of sustenance, the Great Famine struck the people of Ireland. As an immediate consequence over a million people were to perish from hunger, disease and lethal fever .... The Great Famine was Ireland's holocaust, and the slow-sailing vessels ... became coffin ships in which many would-be emigrants died a lingering and painful death. The Great Famine condemned the Irish to be the first boat people of modern Europe ....<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Mitchell, "Grosse Ile Quarantine Station," 1443.

<sup>8</sup>O'Gallagher, *Grosse Ile*, 26.

<sup>9</sup>Suzanne Kingsmill, "Isle of Irish Despair," *Canadian Geographic*, (January-February) 1992, 80.

<sup>10</sup>Ireland Fund of Canada, *Journal* (1992), 14. The classical contemporary accounts are those of Canon John O'Rourke, *The Great Irish Famine* (1874; Dublin 1989) and John Mitchel,

The truth of the declaration on the Irish panel on the Celtic Cross at Grosse Ile — that the Great Famine was “artificial” — is easily demonstrated. The misery of Ireland in the late 1840s had one common root — British colonial rule.

As soon as the potato blight appeared in Belgium in June 1845, informed observers followed John Lindley, editor of the *Gardeners' Chronicle & Agricultural Gazette*, in asking “Where will Ireland be, in the event of a universal potato rot?”<sup>11</sup> In Ireland, where the potato was the basic staple in the diet of between two-thirds and three-quarters of the population of 8.3 million people, the blight was first reported on 9 September 1845. By October, when the potato harvest was traditionally gathered, it was clear that half of Ireland's basic food crop had rotted in the ground. In 1846, the blight returned with greater virulence and virtually the entire crop (already significantly reduced by the shortage of seed-potatoes from the previous year) was destroyed.

The dependency of the Irish people on a crop which was notoriously unreliable — failures of the potato harvest, affecting all or part of the country, were recorded in 22 of the first 44 years of the 19th century — is primarily explicable by the land system. Almost all of Ireland, some 95 per cent of the land, was owned by about 5000 landlords, whose title to the land was the vast confiscations and settlements following military conquest in the second half of the 17th century, codified by the anti-Catholic penal legislation of the 18th century, and copper-fastened by the Act of Union of 1800. Between one-half and two-thirds of Ireland's landowners were permanent absentees, governing their Irish estates through agents and middlemen whose mandate was to extract the largest amount of profit from the land.

Between 1780 and 1845, Irish rent-rolls increased four-fold, from £4 million to over £17 million, as Irish land was increasingly converted from pasture to tillage in order to produce grains for the English market. In the absence of technical advances, grain production was guaranteed by an increasing supply of rural labour. Rapid population growth, concentrated particularly among the rural poor, led to subdivision of the land into ever smaller plots of increasingly marginal land, into the bogs and up the mountain sides. The potato was the most nutritious food crop that could be cultivated on this land. Hunger in the midst of plenty was an essential character of the land system. Entirely typical is the account of the partial famine in the winter of 1821-22, when the potato crop failed but grains were plentiful: the south and west of Ireland provided “a remarkable example of possessing a surplus

---

*The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (Dublin 1861); for a valuable modern reassessment of contemporary Irish views of the Famine, see James S. Donnelly, Jr., “Mass Eviction & the Great Famine: The Clearances Revisited” in Cathal Pórtéir, ed., *The Great Irish Famine* (Dublin 1995), 155-73; also the overview by Cormac O Gráda, *Ireland: A New Economic History, 1780-1939* (Oxford 1994), 171-209.

<sup>11</sup>Cited by Douglas C. Daly, “The Leaf that Launched a Thousand Ships,” *Natural History*, 1, (1996), 29.

of food whilst the inhabitants were suffering from actual want."<sup>12</sup> Even in good years, when the potato crop was healthy and bountiful, a large part of the poorest levels of rural society still went hungry for several weeks in the early summer, between the exhaustion of last year's and the harvest of this year's crop. The 1841 Census reported that the Irish rural working class dependent on the potato — composed of small cottiers, landless labourers, sub-tenants, and the unemployed — amounted to 77 per cent of the population, more than 6 million people.<sup>13</sup>

The potato was, in effect, a substitute for wages. Rural labour was virtually unpaid. Cottiers and small tenant farmers paid rent for their land with cash derived from the sale of grain, and fed their families from the potato garden. In a critical analysis written in 1847, Jasper Rogers explained that when the labourer's or cottier's basic food "fails or becomes scarce, he dies or is half-famished, because the barbarous custom of making the potato the labour-coin of the country deprives him of food and money together."<sup>14</sup>

The land system in Ireland was also a vital link in England's imperial chain — Ireland was England's bread basket. England ruled Ireland as a conquered province, whose purpose was to supply the food to fuel the English industrial revolution. In the 1840s, food exported from Ireland fed more than two million of the industrial poor in England. During the Great Hunger, exports continued while the Irish starved, a fact seared in the Irish memory.

In the long and troubled history of England and Ireland no issue has provoked so much anger or so embittered relations between the two countries as the indisputable fact that huge quantities of food were exported from Ireland to England throughout the period when the people of Ireland were dying of starvation.<sup>15</sup>

When the blight struck, "death from starvation was not a possible but an immediate fate" which directly posed the vital question "what would the British Government do to save Ireland?"<sup>16</sup>

During the Hunger — as a million Irish people died — the English ruling class was under the spell of two equally banal (and malevolent!) superstitions: Providentialism and Political Economy. Edmund Burke, writing to William Pitt in 1795, had clearly stated the connection between the two ideologies: "It is not by breaking the laws of commerce, which are the laws of nature, and consequently the laws of God, that we are to place our hope of softening the divine displeasure to remove

<sup>12</sup>*Report of the Select Committee on the Condition of the Labouring Poor, 1823*, (561), vi, 334.

<sup>13</sup>*Census of Ireland 1841, 1843* (504), xxiv.

<sup>14</sup>J.W. Rogers, *The Potato-Truck System in Ireland* (Dublin 1847), 63.

<sup>15</sup>Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-49* (London 1962), 75.

<sup>16</sup>Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger*, 102.

any calamity under which we suffer.”<sup>17</sup> English society was in the throes of an outburst of evangelical fervour, in which all social, political, economic events — everything humans are exclusively responsible for — were laid at the feet of the vengeful, savage God of the Old Testament. At the same time, as capitalism was making its way in the world as a strutting power, the English bourgeoisie was addicted to the ideas of political economy, the ideology of laissez faire in its most dogmatic, rigid, and destructive form.

Almost without exception the high officials and politicians responsible for Ireland were fervent believers in non-interference by Government, and the behaviour of the British authorities only becomes explicable when their fanatical belief in private enterprise and their suspicions of any action which might be considered Government intervention are borne in mind.<sup>18</sup>

It was Ireland's atrocious bad luck that Irish policy was run by Charles Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary at the Treasury, who was both a conservative monetarist and fervent evangelical Christian. His attitude to Irish poverty and starvation was eminently modern — any extension of assistance beyond the bare necessities would, he said, only create “a nation of beggars.” Writing in February 1847, when the Irish potato harvest had failed for a second time, he shrugged off all human responsibility: “It is hard upon the poor people that they should be deprived of knowing that they are suffering from an affliction of God's providence.”<sup>19</sup>

After the Famine, the landlords and the English government continued to congratulate themselves on their achievement. Lord George Hill, the owner of large estates in Donegal, who was said to be an “improving” landlord with the best interests of his tenants at heart, declared:

The Irish people have profited much by the Famine, the lesson was severe; but so rooted were they in old prejudices and old ways, that no teacher could have induced them to make the changes which this Visitation of Divine Providence has brought about, both in their habits of life and in their mode of agriculture.<sup>20</sup>

While these ideological explanations are true, they tell only part of the story. For, whether in disregard of God or free trade, the British did intervene. But the interventions were concerned, first, to protect the sanctity of private property rather

<sup>17</sup>Cited by Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52* (Dublin 1994), 8.

<sup>18</sup>Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 54.

<sup>19</sup>Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 177; Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, *passim*; Peter Gray, “Potatoes & Providence: British Government's Responses to the Great Famine,” *Bullán*, I, i (Spring 1994), 75-90.

<sup>20</sup>Cited, Kinealy, *This Great Calamity*, 353.

than to succour the starving, and then, to deny and evade any responsibility, financial as well as moral, for the crisis. The financial crisis was very real, and it was the result precisely of a century of interventions. The poorest part of the United Kingdom had been further impoverished by the English policy of stifling at birth any independent Irish economic development — the wool, glass, brewing, linen, cotton, metal, and milling industries had all been crushed by punitive tariffs, unilaterally imposed by London. Free Trade, then as now, is always a one-way street.

The crucial interventions were the 1847 amendments to the Poor Law, designed to make Irish property support Irish poverty, thereby relieving the central exchequer of responsibility. Sir William Gregory's "quarter-acre clause" barred "any person holding more than a quarter-acre of land from receiving relief until he had parted with possession of the land."<sup>21</sup> At the same time, responsibility for outdoor relief and the maintenance of the destitute in the workhouses was transferred to the Irish rate-payers — landlords whose rental income had collapsed. The combination was lethal.

Starving and hungry tenants everywhere gave up their land ... in order to qualify for relief, or they were evicted — every encouragement and facility being extended in all this period to the landlords to evict — for inability to pay rent, but the result was the same, clearance and depopulation and emigration. Those who could find, or borrow, the money to pay the fare, emigrated, those who could not starved and sickened and died.<sup>22</sup>

"A more complete engine for the slaughter and expatriation of a people was never designed," wrote O'Rourke.<sup>23</sup> The Irish economic historian George O'Brien called the Gregory clause "one of the most effective legislative aids to ejectment ever devised."<sup>24</sup> Effective it certainly was: in 1847-48, at least 260,000 people were evicted and driven off the land.<sup>25</sup>

Nor were the English ignorant of the effects of their legislative actions. Charles Wood, Chancellor of the Exchequer, wrote that "except through a purgatory of misery and starvation, I cannot see how Ireland is to emerge into a state of anything approaching quiet or prosperity."<sup>26</sup> His cabinet colleague and future Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, explained both end and means:

<sup>21</sup>R. D. Collison Black, *Economic Thought & the Irish Question, 1817-70* (Cambridge 1960), 126.

<sup>22</sup>P.S. O'Hegarty, *A History of Ireland Under the Union, 1801-1922* (London 1952), 318; Redcliffe N. Salaman, *The History & Social Influence of the Potato* (Cambridge 1949), 315-6.

<sup>23</sup>O'Rourke, *Great Irish Famine*, 171.

<sup>24</sup>George O'Brien, *The Economic History of Ireland from the Union to the Famine* (Dublin 1921), 278.

<sup>25</sup>Donnelly, "Mass Eviction," 155-8.

<sup>26</sup>Cited by Christine Kinealy, "How Politics Fed the Famine," *Natural History*, 1, (1996), 35.



It is useless to disguise the truth that any great improvement in the social system of Ireland must be founded upon an extensive change in the present system of agrarian occupation, and that this change necessarily implies a long, continued and systematic ejection of small holders and of squatting cottiers.<sup>27</sup>

Palmerston's interest in the subject was not merely academic, for he was also an absentee landowner of large estates in the west of Ireland. In 1847, he took advantage of the Gregory clause and instructed his agents to evict 4000 tenants. They were driven, like cattle, to the emigrant ships in Sligo harbour and transported to Canada, where their condition — starving, febrile, and half-naked — provoked distaste and anger. Among those who wrote to London about Palmerston's deportees were Adam Ferrie, chairman of the Legislative Assembly's Emigration committee — who called their condition "as bad as the slave trade" — and the Common Council of St. John, New Brunswick.<sup>28</sup>

The documentary evidence is unequivocal. The "clearance" of the Irish people from Irish soil — as had already happened in the Scottish Highlands — was the essence of England's Irish policy. It was vital to their vision of Ireland's place in the British economy, as the source of cheap food for the English working class. No wonder the epigraph coined by John Mitchel became an established truth — a view shared widely in Ireland, across a broad spectrum of respectable as well as revolutionary opinion — "The Almighty indeed sent the blight, but the English created the Famine."<sup>29</sup>

### *Catastrophe at Grosse Ile*

In 1846, after the first blast of blight, but before the full fury of the Famine swept Ireland, nearly 33,000 people, mostly Irish, entered Canada at Québec City. Already the effects of the Famine in Ireland were evident in the report that twice as many people as usual were admitted to the hospital on Grosse Ile.

In February 1847, before the year's first emigrant ships arrived, Dr. George Mellis Douglas, Medical Superintendent, warned the Legislative Assembly that the approaching season would bring "a greater amount of sickness and mortality" and that the closure of American ports would "augment the number of poor and destitute who will flock to our shores." Little had changed on the island since 1832: its establishment consisted of a hospital shed, two chapels, a bakery, a barracks, and the doctor's house. Douglas asked for £3000 to expand the quarantine facilities to

<sup>27</sup> Cited by Christine Kinealy, "The Role of the Poor Law during the Famine," in Póirtéir, ed., *The Great Irish Famine*, 117.

<sup>28</sup> Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 228-9.

<sup>29</sup> John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, 219; Donnelly, "Mass Eviction," *passim*; Thomas Gallagher, *Paddy's Lament: Ireland 1846-47* (New York 1987), 146-8.

cope with the expected increase in numbers; he was given £300 with which he managed to acquire 50 extra beds.<sup>30</sup>

Ellen Kane, "legitimate daughter of John Kane, weaver, and Bridget McNally of the parish of Kilmore in the county of Mayo," was four years old. She died on 15 May 1847, the day she arrived in the *New World*.<sup>31</sup> In 1847 the shipping season in the St. Lawrence opened as usual with the thaw in mid-May. The *Syria* was the first ship to arrive. It sailed from Liverpool on 24 March carrying 241 passengers — including Ellen Kane and her parents — and anchored at Grosse Ile on 15 May. Six days later, 202 passengers from the *Syria* were ill. The quarantine hospital on the island, built for 150 patients, could barely accommodate 200, and was already filled to capacity.<sup>32</sup>

Dr. Douglas was astonished by the "unprecedented ... state of illness and distress" on the coffin ships; he had "never contemplated the possibility of every vessel arriving with fever as they do now," all carrying passengers "in the most wretched state of disease." On 23 May, 36 coffin ships lay at anchor, full of passengers, close to 12,500 altogether, old and young, healthy and sick, dying and dead sharing grossly overcrowded quarters, packed as human ballast in the holds of vessels built not as passenger ships but to carry Canadian lumber to England.<sup>33</sup> Reporting between 50 and 60 deaths per day, Douglas was resigned to the prospect that many more would fall sick and need treatment but the hospitals on the island were overwhelmed: "I have not a bed to lay them on or a place to put them in." He was therefore forced to flout quarantine regulations and confine all passengers on board the ships.<sup>34</sup>

On 29 May, Alexander Buchanan, Chief Emigration Agent at Québec, blamed the problem on the laxity of the British shipping regulations and the greed of the ship owners: "Much of the present disease and sickness is, I fear, attributed to the want of sufficient nourishing food."<sup>35</sup> British shipping regulations provided for the barest minimum as rations for emigrants; ship owners and captains seldom provided more. The crews were often callous, brutal, capricious, and avaricious.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Donald MacKay, *Flight From Famine: The Coming of the Irish to Canada* (Toronto 1990), 263; Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 218.

<sup>31</sup>Marianna O'Gallagher and Rose Dompierre, *Eyewitness Grosse Ile 1847* (Québec 1995), 69.

<sup>32</sup>Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 219-20.

<sup>33</sup>Terry Coleman, *Passage to America* (1972; Québec 1991), 84; Marianna O'Gallagher, "Island of Sorrows," *Irish America* (April 1991), 27; Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 222-30; MacKay, *Flight from Famine*, 198-9.

<sup>34</sup>Letter from Douglas to Provincial Secretary, Dominick Daly, in *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 6 (1847), App. L.

<sup>35</sup>Letter from Douglas to Provincial Secretary, Dominick Daly, in *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 6 (1847), App. L.

<sup>36</sup>Coleman, *Passage*, Chapter 6: "Hard-driven Ships & Brutal Crews," 82-99; MacKay, *Flight from Famine*, 198-215.

Profiteering ship's chandlers supplied mouldy food and water that was unfit to drink, and shipping agents in Ireland and Liverpool advised passengers to take aboard their own food supplies, an impossible demand on people who were already starving and destitute. The Irish who fled the Famine on the ships which reached Grosse Ile tended to be the poorest emigrants: passage to Québec was half the going rate to American ports, cheap enough for those who scraped together their last few shillings and a powerful attraction also for landlords who offered their evicted tenants "assisted emigration." Steerage passengers, accommodated between decks in temporary bunks, were allotted less space than British regulations had defined as adequate for the transport of slaves from Africa.<sup>37</sup>

One extraordinary witness of Grosse Ile in 1847 was Stephen De Vere, scion of an Anglo-Irish family from County Limerick, landlord, magistrate, and social reformer. He took passage on an emigrant ship to provide a first-hand account to the Colonial Office. His description of conditions on the ship which, he was assured, was "more comfortable than many" is a funeral dirge.

Hundreds of poor people, men, women and children, of all ages from the drivelling idiot of 90 to the babe just born, huddled together, without light, without air, wallowing in filth, and breathing a foetid atmosphere, sick in body dispirited in heart ... the fevered patients lying between the sound in sleeping places so narrow, as almost to deny them a change of position ... living without food or medicine except as administered by the hand of casual charity, dying without spiritual consolation and buried in the deep without the rites of the church.<sup>38</sup>

On 31 May, 40 vessels were at anchor in a line stretching over 2 miles downstream. More than a thousand fever cases were on the island, the overflow from the hospital housed in hastily erected tents and in the chapels. Thousands more waited on the ships. The death toll was appalling — 900 people had died since Ellen Kane.

### *The Medical Commission & Select Committee*

On 5 June, when the Medical Commission appointed to examine the crisis reached the island, 21,000 emigrants were at Grosse Ile and the death toll had tripled — 150 people were buried that day.<sup>39</sup> The doctors discovered the sick on the island "in the most deplorable condition, for want of the necessary nurses and hospital attendants," while on board the ships in the river they found "corpses lying in the

<sup>37</sup> Coleman, *Passage*, Appendix A, 324-32.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen De Vere, cited by Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 226.

<sup>39</sup> *Morning Chronicle* (Québec), 10 June 1847, cited Padraic O Laighin, "Grosse Ile: The Holocaust Revisited," in Robert O'Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds, eds., *The Untold Story: The Irish in Canada* (Toronto 1988), v. I, 84; O'Gallagher and Dompierre, *Eyewitness*, 118, cites a report by Rev. Charles Forest, Anglican minister at Grosse Ile, giving 115 burials on 5 June.

same beds with the sick and the dying." Echoing Buchanan's criticism of "the crowded manner in which vessels were allowed to leave the British Ports," they also noted the demoralization of the victims: "common sympathies being apparently annihilated by the mental and bodily depression produced by famine and disease." The Commissioners criticized Douglas's management of the quarantine station:

We entirely disapprove of the plan of keeping a vessel in quarantine for any period, however prolonged, whilst the sick and healthy are congregated together, breathing the same atmosphere, sleeping in the same berths, and exposed to the same exciting causes of contagion. This year's melancholy experience has in many instances proved that the number attacked and the mortality of the disease increased in direct ratio with the length of time the ship was detained under such circumstances. As an evidence of the truth of the above statement, we may be permitted to instance the case of the ship *Agnes* which arrived about 16 days ago, with 427 passengers, out of which number not more than 150 are now in a healthy condition, the remainder being dead, or sick on board, or in Hospital.

They were, however, unable to offer any remedies beyond instructing Dr. Douglas to comply with regulations — which was, by this stage, no longer possible.<sup>40</sup>

A month later, the Legislative Assembly created a Special Committee of inquiry into the management of the Grosse Ile quarantine station; its report, hastily delivered in late July, simply reproduced the testimony of the witnesses, without commentary or recommendations. The witnesses were unanimous. Conditions on the island were unbearable. Douglas and his assistants — medical, clerical and lay — were worn out and oppressed by the disease and mortality all around them. The sheds, tents, and other buildings were overflowing. Beds, such as they were, were shared by as many as three people. Many fever victims were lying on bare planks or on the ground, the more fortunate on a bedding of straw. The dead were buried in trenches, one on top of another. So many were interred and so close to the surface, soil was brought from the mainland to cover the dead; even so, this failed to deter the rats that came ashore from the ships to feast on the cadavers.<sup>41</sup>

Fr. Bernard McGauran, who led the first group of Catholic priests told the Select Committee, "I have seen in one day thirty-seven lying on the beach, crawling in the mud and dying like fish out of water."<sup>42</sup> The Anglican Bishop of Montréal, George Mountain, who visited the island twice, said he observed "scenes of

<sup>40</sup>Report of the Medical Commissioners, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 6 (1847), App. L.

<sup>41</sup>Report of the Special Committee appointed to inquire into the management of the Quarantine Station at Grosse Ile, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 6 (1847), App. RRR, n.p.; A. Béchar, *Histoire de l'île-aux-grues et des îles environnantes* (Québec 1879) cited by Coleman, *Passage*, 150.

<sup>42</sup>Report of the Select Committee, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 6 (1847), App. RRR; cited by MacKay, *Flight from Famine*, 269.

loathsomeness, suffering and horror, in the holds of the ships and in the receptacles for the patients."<sup>43</sup>

Fr. William Moylan, parish priest of St. Patrick's in Québec City, saw corpses left lying overnight in the bunks in the hospital "even when they had a companion in the same bed." He confirmed the Medical Commission's observations, saying "the sick would have been better ashore under tents, having medical attendance close at hand, and besides would not have affected the healthy Emigrants confined in the holds of the vessels with them." He estimated the mortality as a result of confinement on the ships was "at least twice as great as on shore."<sup>44</sup> De Vere had said the same thing — both "medical attendance and hospital accommodations were inadequate." Because the doctors were overwhelmed, the "medical inspections on board were slight and hasty" producing a "twofold ill effect": "Some were detained in danger who were not ill, and many were allowed to proceed who were actually in fever."<sup>45</sup>

Fr. Bernard O'Reilly from Sherbrooke blamed the British government for the conditions on the emigrant ships, but he also warned the Canadians that unless they acted quickly they would "choose to consent to the wholesale murder of thousands who are just now on the ocean or preparing to leave home for Canada." He balanced praise for Dr. Douglas's unstinting efforts with reiteration of criticism of the policy of keeping people on board the ships.<sup>46</sup>

Even those who escaped confinement in the holds of the ships were not safe. Fr. Jean Baptiste Antoine Ferland reported that "in the greater part of the sheds on Grosse Ile, men, women and children are found huddled together in the same apartment ... many who have entered the shed without any serious illness, have died of typhus, which they have caught from their neighbours."<sup>47</sup> De Vere's description of the hospital sheds on the island confirmed the observations of other witnesses:

They were very miserable, so slightly built as to exclude neither the heat nor the cold. No sufficient care was taken to remove the sick from the sound or to disinfect and clean the beddings. The very straw upon which they had lain was often allowed to become a bed for their successors and I have known many poor families prefer to burrow under heaps of stones, near the shore, rather than accept the shelter of the infected sheds.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Report of the Select Committee, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 6 (1847), App. RRR.

<sup>44</sup>Report of the Select Committee, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 6 (1847), App. RRR.

<sup>45</sup>De Vere, cited by MacKay, *Flight from Famine*, 267; Anick, "Grosse Ile & Partridge Island," 85.

<sup>46</sup>Report of the Select Committee, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 6 (1847), App. RRR.

<sup>47</sup>Report of the Select Committee, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 6 (1847), App. RRR.

<sup>48</sup>Stephen De Vere, cited in Whyte, *Ocean Plague*, Appendix III, 114.

*Coffin Ships*

As the summer wore on, Buchanan's complaint became a common refrain as the Canadians confronted shipload after shipload of malnourished, diseased, and even naked people. On 25 June, the Legislative Assembly voted to urge the British government to amend the shipping regulations, calling specifically for more space per passenger, more food, and better medical facilities.<sup>49</sup>

The *Agnes*, cited by the Medical Commission, was not extraordinary. The *Sir Henry Pottinger* left Cork with 399 passengers — 106 died and 100 were sick. The *Larch* sailed from Sligo with 440 passengers — 108 died at sea and 150 had the fever on arrival. The *Lord Ashburton* brought Palmerston's evicted tenants, whose condition was called "a disgrace to the home authorities" by the *Quebec Gazette*.<sup>50</sup>

Ships carrying "assisted emigrants" — deportees who had been evicted and transported to Canada — were among the worst. Major Denis Mahon, having evicted thousands of tenants, won a place in history as one of the handful of landlords assassinated in 1847. He left behind, also, an unadorned summary of the landlords' economic point of view. "I think the first class for us to send is those of the poorest and worst description, who would be a charge on us for the Poor House or for Outdoor Relief, and that would relieve the industrious tenant," he wrote to his agent.<sup>51</sup>

Conditions on the first of Mahon's ships to arrive at Grosse Ile struck Dr. Douglas as noteworthy even after weeks of unrelieved horror:

The *Virginus* sailed from Liverpool, May 28, with 476 passengers. Fever and dysentery cases came on board this vessel in Liverpool, and deaths occurred before leaving the Mersey. On mustering the passengers for inspection yesterday, it was found that 106 were ill of fever, including nine of the crew, and the large number of 158 had died on the passage, including the first and second officers and seven of the crew, and the master and steward dying, the few that were able to come on deck were ghastly yellow looking spectres, unshaven and hollow cheeked, and, without exception, the worst looking passengers I have ever seen; not more than six or eight were really healthy and able to exert themselves.<sup>52</sup>

Nineteen more passengers died while the *Virginus* was at anchor, and 90 died in the sheds. As he was writing this report, two more of Mahon's ships arrived. On the *Naomi*, said Douglas, "the filth and dirt in this vessel's hold creates such an effluvia as to make it difficult to breathe." The *Erin's Queen* sailed with 493

<sup>49</sup>O Laighin, "Holocaust Revisited," 85.

<sup>50</sup>Cited by Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 229.

<sup>51</sup>Stephen J. Campbell, *The Great Irish Famine*, (Famine Museum: Strokestown 1994), 41.

<sup>52</sup>British Parliamentary Papers, *Colonies — Canada*, Vol. 17, 385.

people — 136 died at sea; on arrival at Grosse Ile, the ship's master had to bribe his crew, at the rate of a sovereign per corpse, to remove the dead from the hold.<sup>53</sup>

### *Triage*

Since neither the Medical Commissioners nor the Select Committee's critics of the quarantine arrangements were able to offer an alternative, it fell again on the shoulders of Dr. Douglas to seek a remedy. In the first half of July, before testifying at the Special Committee hearings, Douglas initiated a form of triage, based on the sound medical principle of preventing the spread of disease by segregating the healthy from the sick. Dividing the island into "sick" and "healthy" zones, he set up a new hospital area at the eastern end of the island for the healthy and oversaw the rapid construction of a dozen pre-fabricated wooden hospital sheds — of which the Lazaretto is the sole remaining example. By August, the hospital sheds and tents could accommodate 2000 sick people, 300 convalescents, and as many as 3,500 people deemed healthy but held in quarantine. The year-end summary report of public works on the island listed a total of 22 hospital sheds.<sup>54</sup>

Unfortunately, the difficulties of diagnosis and epidemiology which had been evident in 1832 remained, and were compounded by the sheer size of the task. Despite good intentions, segregation was at best a palliative measure, at worst it exacerbated the situation, spreading the disease even more widely. Fr. O'Reilly gave the last rites to 50 people, on one July day, among the so-called healthy. The problem persisted — 27 "healthy" people died on 31 July; a month later, the *Montreal Gazette* reported 88 deaths in one week among the healthy. As late as 16 September, the *Quebec Mercury* reported a large number of dysentery cases among the healthy.<sup>55</sup>

In September, as the shipping season drew to a close, 2,500 patients were on the island and 14,000 people were still held in quarantine aboard the ships. Twelve hundred of the sick were transferred to the hospitals at the east end of the island on 13 September, to allow Douglas and his staff to fumigate the sheds and tents at the western end. In the first three weeks of October, the parish register of St. Luke's church on the island recorded 97 anonymous burials. At the end of October, after the first snowfall of the winter, the final 60 patients on the island were transferred

<sup>53</sup>Douglas's testimony to the Special Committee, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 6 (1847), App. RRR, in O'Gallagher and Dompierre, *Eyewitness*, 177; Coleman, *Passage*, 160.

<sup>54</sup>*Quebec Mercury*, 7 August 1847; Christine Chartré, *Chronologie des Aménagements de Grosse-Ile, 1796-1990* (Québec 1992), 39-51; Anick, "Grosse Ile & Partridge Island," 86.

<sup>55</sup>Report of the Select Committee, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 6 (1847), App. RRR; *Montreal Gazette*, 20 August 1847, cited by Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 222; *Quebec Mercury*, 31 July 1847 and 16 September 1847, cited by Chartré, *Chronologie*, 43, 48.

to hospitals at Québec and Montréal and the Grosse Ile quarantine station closed for the winter.

### *The Ocean Plague*

The implications of failure of the quarantine system were well understood. As early as 8 June, Douglas warned of the imminent danger of the spread of disease throughout the colony:

Out of the 4,000 or 5,000 emigrants who have left this island since Sunday, at least 2,000 will fall sick somewhere before three weeks are over. They ought to have accommodation for 2,000 sick at least at Montreal and Quebec, as all the Cork and Liverpool passengers are half dead from starvation and want before embarking; and the least bowel complaint, which is sure to come with change of food, finishes them without a struggle. I never saw people so indifferent to life; they would continue in the same berth with the dead person until the seamen or captain dragged out the corpse with boat hooks. Good God! what evils will befall the cities wherever they alight. Hot weather will increase the evil. Now give the authorities of Quebec and Montreal fair warning from me. I have not time to write, or should feel it my duty to do so. Public safety requires it.<sup>56</sup>

Six weeks later, Fr. O'Reilly told the inquiry "those who are healthy, if sent up as hitherto to Montréal, must bring with them the seeds of sickness ... while out of the numbers who can leave Montréal for a further destination, the large majority are pre-doomed to expire on the wharves of Kingston or Toronto, and to carry with them whithersoever they direct their steps, the dreadful malady that now hangs over the country like a funeral pall."<sup>57</sup> Later that year, in a memoir of his journey as a cabin passenger, memorably entitled *The Ocean Plague*, Robert Whyte forecast more deaths, as his fellow passengers "wandered over the country, carrying nothing with them but disease, and that but very few of them survived the severity of the succeeding winter, ruined as their constitutions were, I am quite confident."<sup>58</sup>

These gloomy predictions were all too accurate. In Montréal, the growing danger of further contagion — 30 people a day were dying in June — led to the establishment of a second quarantine station at Point St. Charles, where hospital sheds and open-sided shelters for the healthy were built. The new establishment formed "a large square with a court in the centre where the coffins were piled, some empty waiting for the dead, some full awaiting burial."<sup>59</sup> Twelve years later, when the site was cleared for construction of the Victoria Bridge, the workers — mostly Irishmen — downed tools and refused to continue until a proper memorial was built. They dredged a huge black stone out of the river and had carved on it this

<sup>56</sup>Cited by MacKay, *Flight from Famine*, 265; Coleman, *Passage*, 149.

<sup>57</sup>Report of the Select Committee, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 6 (1847), App. RRR.

<sup>58</sup>Whyte, *Ocean Plague*, 84.

<sup>59</sup>Cited by Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 235.



inscription:

To preserve from desecration the remains of 6000 immigrants who died from ship fever AD 1847-48 this stone is erected by the workmen of Messrs. Peto, Brassey and Betts employed in the construction of the Victoria Bridge AD 1859.

The Montréal experience was repeated as the epidemic swept down the St. Lawrence from Québec to Hamilton. The emaciated, starving, destitute, and febrile Irish brought disease and misery with them. They caused alarm and fear but, for the most part, generosity outweighed xenophobia in the Canadian response. Indeed, the story of 1847 is as much one of Canadian charity as it is Irish suffering. In the face of fearful suffering, many Canadians demonstrated great magnanimity. Fever sheds were built, the victims were hastily segregated, and they were tended — tirelessly and heroically — by clergy and laity in each community, but still thousands died.

And as the Irish died, they infected their hosts. At Grosse Ile, 2 of the 17 Anglican clergymen died, as did 4 of the 42 Catholic priests who served there. Douglas also reported the deaths of 34 workers: stewards, nurses, orderlies, cooks, policemen, and carters. The “ocean plague” exacted its price further afield, claiming more victims in Québec City, Montréal, Kingston, and Toronto. Among the nurses of the Order of Grey Nuns, most fell ill and several died. Nine priests including Fr. Hudon, Vicar-General of Montréal, died in that city. In November, John Mills, the Mayor of Montréal whose energy and altruism ensured relatively safe and healthy conditions for the famine victims, caught the fever at the sheds and died. The same fate befell Toronto’s first Catholic Bishop, Michael Power.

At the end of the year, Douglas raised a monument at the mass graveyard on Grosse Ile, to mark the sacrifice of the four doctors — Benson, Pinet, Malhiot, and Jameson — who “died of typhus fever contracted in the faithful discharge of their duty upon the sick.” Dr. John Benson is a striking symbol of the whole complex of the epidemic of 1847. He was a 60-year-old physician with experience in the fever hospitals in Ireland, who had been evicted from an estate in Castlecomer, county Kilkenny. He arrived at Grosse Ile on the *Wandsworth* on 20 May, volunteered to assist Dr. Douglas, contracted typhus, and died within a week. The monument also bears this inscription:

In this secluded spot lie the mortal remains of 5424 persons who fleeing from Pestilence and Famine in Ireland in the year 1847 found in America but a Grave.

Like other witnesses, Bishop Mountain was particularly touched by the plight of the hundreds of children left orphans by the epidemic. Among the dozens of miserable waifs, a couple particularly caught his attention: a dying child, huddled under a pile of rags in one of the tents; and the body of a little boy who, after walking

with his friends, sat down to rest under a tree and died.<sup>60</sup> Fr. Charles-Félix Cazeau, “priest to the Irish” and future Vicar-General of Québec, oversaw the future of the children. In Québec and Montréal, the Catholic charities took charge of the children — perhaps 2000 all told — and the priests went on the circuit of parishes in Québec urging the faithful to adopt the orphans. One priest, Fr. Thomas Cooke of Trois Rivières, wrote that his parishioners were arguing over the right to adopt the orphans. That so many Irish names continue to exist in Québec, in the francophone population, testifies to a remarkable generosity, for many of the adopted children were allowed to retain their Irish names.<sup>61</sup>

### *Hallowed Ground*

The assertion that Grosse Ile is the most important Great Famine site outside Ireland, begs a critical question: how many Irish men, women, and children were buried there? A completely accurate answer is not within our grasp. It was in the interests of many — the British government and politicians, English landlords and, apparently, the colonial administration in Canada — to minimize the extent of what happened in 1847. Moreover, there is no doubt that the statistics for 1847 are incomplete, inconsistent, and contradictory.

In March 1848, the British government reported that 258,000 people, the vast majority Irish, set sail in 1847; 143,400 for the US and 106,812 for British North America; another parliamentary paper says 109,680 people sailed for Canada.<sup>62</sup> Either number is an underestimate, by as much as 10 per cent, for two reasons. First, a number of the ships destined for American ports were turned away on arrival and made their way to Halifax, St. John, or Grosse Ile.<sup>63</sup> Secondly, the official manner of reckoning passengers counted “statute adults” as defined in the British shipping regulations, that is, one person over the age of fourteen, or a mother and dependent child under one year, or two children between one and fourteen years old. So, for example, the master of the *Greenock* was legally correct to declare he carried only 633 “statute adults,” though his vessel was crammed with 816 persons: 528 adults, 210 children between the ages of 1 and 14, and 78 infants.<sup>64</sup>

Buchanan’s first report said 97,002 people actually reached Québec City in 1847. He then produced two more reports in December 1847. The first, approved by the Committee of the Executive Council, gives 98,106 as the total number of immigrants landing at Québec. The second reduced the number of Irish immigrants

<sup>60</sup>Cited by Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 222.

<sup>61</sup>O’Gallagher, *Grosse Ile*, 56-7, 115-43; Coleman, *Passage*, 156-7.

<sup>62</sup>*Report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords on Colonization from Ireland*, 1848, v. 5, 42; Anick, “Grosse Ile & Partridge Island,” 81, citing *Report of the Selection Committee of the House of Lords on Colonization from Ireland*, 55; Coleman, *Passage*, 161, citing *Reports of Colonial Land & Emigration Commissioners*, 1848 and 1873

<sup>63</sup>Woodham-Smith, *Great Hunger*, 239-40.

<sup>64</sup>*Colonies — Canada*, v. 17, 422, cited by O Laighin, 89.

to 89,738, of whom 5,293 died before arriving, leaving only 84,445 who actually reached Canada. A year later, in his annual report for 1848, Buchanan lowered the number again, to 82,713 or 82,694 emigrants landing at Québec in 1847.<sup>65</sup>

With discrepancies like this in the record of those who survived the coffin ships, it is no surprise to find the same difficulties in the numbers given in the official records of deaths in 1847. How many died at Grosse Ile? In 1847, 3 official reports gave 3 official numbers: Douglas — 3,238; Buchanan — 3,389; the Colonial Commissioners — 3,452 deaths at quarantine. But Bishop Mountain, writing in 1848, said "more than 5,400 bodies were buried at the island," and clearly inscribed on the doctors' monument erected by Douglas is the number 5,424.<sup>66</sup>

Approaching the matter from Grosse Ile itself is no more helpful. The records on the island are fragmentary and internally contradictory. Thus, for instance, Fr. Philippe Jean recorded in the parish register of St. Luke's, the Catholic chapel on the island, that he buried 21 people on June 23, but the summary of burials, from the same parish register, says 112 people "*sans qu'il ait été possible de mentionner les noms*" ("whom it was not possible to name") were buried that day. The register's summary of burials says a total of 2,900 people were buried between 16 June and 20 October; but the preceding 4 weeks, from 17 May, when at least 1,050 deaths were reported, are unrecorded. The officials, doctors, priests, and lay attendants were so overwhelmed they lost count of the dead within the first month. In July, Dr. Douglas told the Special Committee "six men are constantly employed digging large trenches from five to six feet deep, in which the dead are buried." This mass grave, at the western end of the island, occupied an area of six acres.<sup>67</sup> If the average number of people buried in each trench (120) is extended backwards to fill in the gap to 15 May, when Ellen Kane died, then this one mass graveyard probably holds the remains of no fewer than 7,000 people.<sup>68</sup>

While the six-acre field was the principal cemetery in 1847, it was not the only burial site on the island. Douglas told the Special Committee that "at first the dead brought from vessels were buried by the parties bringing them," but, significantly, he does not say where they were buried. The eyewitness accounts suggest, first, that Dr. Douglas's hospital records are necessarily incomplete, since they did not

<sup>65</sup> *Colonies — Canada*, v. 18, 449; v. 17, 384; v. 18, 463-69; *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada* (1849), App. EEE; Anick, "Grosse Ile & Partridge Island," 84; O'Laighin, "Holocaust Revisited," 88-9; Coleman, *Passage*, 160-1; cf. Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems, 1948-1954, *Reports* (Dublin 1954), Statistical Appendix, 314-20.

<sup>66</sup> Anick, "Grosse Ile & Partridge Island," 86, citing Report of a Committee of the Executive Council, *Colonies — Canada*, v. 17, 385; cf. Coleman, *Passage*, 161, citing Eighth Report of the Colonial Land & Emigration Commissioners; O'Gallagher and Dompierre, *Eyewitness*, 383-95.

<sup>67</sup> Report of the Select Committee, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 6 (1847), App. RRR.

<sup>68</sup> O'Gallagher, *Grosse Ile*, 169, 173.

record all the dead who were winched out of the holds of the ships and "stacked like cordwood" on the shoreline to await burial, and secondly, that some of the victims, feverish and hallucinating, wandered away from the sheds and tents, to die in the bush and to be buried wherever they fell.

Finally, there is the contentious issue of the cemetery at the eastern end of the island.<sup>69</sup> In light of the evidence of substantial numbers of deaths among the healthy, this area too contains the remains of Famine victims. The alternative explanation — that the bodies of those who died in the "healthy" zone, of fearsome contagious fevers, were transported across the island for burial south of Cholera Bay — is illogical and unreasonable. Moreover, oral tradition in the region tells the story of the bulldozer driver, employed by the Canadian Department of Agriculture in 1964 to grade the land for an airstrip, who uncovered human bones. Unlike the main mass grave site at the west end of the island, this area is less well-known and, despite clear evidence of its existence and extent in the archives, it was only grudgingly acknowledged by the Canadian Parks Service.<sup>70</sup>

We shall never know exactly how many Irish people are buried at Grosse Ile. Early accounts, by J.F. Maguire and Béchard, estimated the number of Irish people buried on the island in 1847 at 12,000; a later local history put the figure at 11,000 — to which, of course, we should add the 3,000 cholera victims of 1832.<sup>71</sup> In the end, it is less significant to arrive at a definitive number than to acknowledge the sanctity of the site. Let the estimate stand, conservatively, at between 12,000 and 15,000, and recognize that their presence makes Grosse Ile hallowed ground.

The special significance of Grosse Ile for the Irish diaspora was already evident 100 years ago, when the Irish community in Québec marked the 50th anniversary of "Black '47" with a pilgrimage to the island. The Ancient Order of Hibernians then launched a campaign to mark the site, and on 15 August 1909, a 15-metre granite Celtic Cross was unveiled on Telegraph Hill, the highest point on Grosse Ile, 45 metres above the river. It faces west, towards the new life the thousands who died at Grosse Ile never saw. The opening ceremony drew 9,000 people from across North America. The cross was unveiled by the Papal Legate, Mgr. Antonio Sbaretti;

<sup>69</sup>Christine Chartré, *Rapport synthèse sur les aménagements de Grosse-Ile 1832 à nos jours* (Québec 1992), 61.

<sup>70</sup>Chartré, *Rapport synthèse*, 116, 196, 328, 348, 360; Pierre Dufour et al., *Inventaire sommaire du patrimoine architectural de la Grosse-Ile* (Québec 1983), 98-9; *Grosse Ile: Development Concept and Supplement* (Québec 1992) — the Supplement says the cemetery at the east end of Grosse Ile was not opened until 1848 or at the earliest "the end of 1847," 13-7.

<sup>71</sup>John Francis Maguire, *The Irish in America* (London 1868); A. Béchard, *Histoire de l'île-aux-grues et des îles environnantes* (Québec 1879); J.A. Jordan, *The Grosse Ile Tragedy* (Québec 1909); Damase Potvin, *Le Saint-Laurent et ses îles*, (Montréal 1940), cited by Coleman, *Passage*, 150-6; see also Padraic O Laighin, "Grosse Ile: The Irish Island," *Public Consultation: Briefs presented in Montréal* (Québec 1992), note 5.

sermons were delivered by Archbishop (later Cardinal) Louis-Nazaire Bégin, and Fr. A. E. Maguire, chaplain to the AOH. Among those present at the ceremony were Fr. McGuirk, the last survivor of the 42 priests who tended the victims of 1847, and Madame Roberge, one of the many children orphaned that year and adopted by a local family. The dignitaries included Canada's Chief Justice, Sir Charles Fitzpatrick and Secretary of State Charles Murphy, as well as members of both federal and provincial parliaments.<sup>72</sup>

In August 1994, Mary Robinson, President of Ireland made a state visit to Canada. In a striking diplomatic gesture, her first engagement was to visit Grosse Ile. Echoing Dr. Brennan, she stressed that while the failure of the potato was a "natural disaster" across Europe, "in Ireland it took place in a political, economic and social framework that was oppressive and unjust." Speaking to 400 people gathered on the island to commemorate the victims of 1847, she said, "Grosse Ile — *Oileán na nGael* — *l'île des irlandais* — is special. ... This is a hallowed place."<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup>O'Gallagher, *Grosse Ile*, 85-8.

<sup>73</sup>"Address by the President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, at Grosse Ile on 21st August, 1994," 1-2.